

# Alliteration in Tennyson

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## Alliteration in Tennyson.

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(a) Two sounds.

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## V. B. 2.

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## Alliteration in Tennyson.

The word alliteration is derived from the Latin ad + littera meaning, "to the letter". So the definition often stands, "Alliteration is the beginning of words standing near to-gether with the same letter". But sometimes this would be alliteration to the eye only and not to the ear, as,

"----- for his talk  
Was wont to glance and sparkle like  
a gem" p. 153. or

"And children of the king in cloth of gold"  
Since the effect on the eye is slight compared to the effect on the ear alliteration should be defined



the commencing of certain words near to gether with the same sound, or as Dallas in Britannica puts it, "Alliteration is a jingling of like beginnings". Two further rules govern poets in the use of alliteration to-day. The rime-letters must be consonants, and must begin accented syllables. This accent is not necessarily a metrical accent, but may be due to the pronunciation of the word or to the sense of the passage. Often all three causes unite on the same syllable, to make it emphatic. Yet it is possible that lines may occur obeying all these rules which are not very musical nor effective

because they are the results of mere accident, and not true alliteration. This is a point on which no hard lines can <sup>be</sup> drawn, and so depends upon individual judgment, yet the effectiveness of the first of the following examples, - true alliteration, - forms a marked contrast to the second whether it is called accidental or true alliteration.

"But day increased from heat to heat  
On stony drought and steaming salt." p. 24.

"That tho' he thought, 'was it for him  
she wept?'" p. 154.

The earliest Anglo-Saxon poetry which has come down to

us is based on alliteration. The rime-letters were either consonants or vowels. If consonants, they must be the same throughout each verse, but a vowel might rime with any other vowel. The usual form was a verse of four accents, arranged in two lines. The very earliest form seemed to favor one rime-letter in each half of the verse. As culture advanced, and more attention was paid to the style, two syllables of the first line and the first syllable of the second line began with rime-letters. This is the form in which the bulk of Anglo-Saxon poetry, which has come down to us was written. Rarely

there were two rime-letters in each line of the couplet; and occasionally there was no alliteration whatever, when the accented syllables kept up the rhythm. The number of syllables in each verse was variable, often being increased by the "catch,"—one or more unaccented syllables preceding the first accented syllable in each line. From Beowulf and Caedmon, the early Anglo-Saxon writings, to the Early English as Piers Plowman, the use of alliteration changes little, except that the catch at the beginning of the second line becomes longer and more frequent. The following line from Beowulf obeys all the rules.

"wom wundor- bebodum  
wergan gastes" l. 1648.

The following has a "catch" in the second line.

"helpan ät hilde  
 wäs sio) hond tō strong." l. 2685.

After the conquest the poems were often six accent lines, and vowels were used much more frequently for rime letters. Most true-alliterative Anglo-Saxon poetry has no rime whatever, but there are a few cases of genuine end-rime in the earlier writings. But later, when the attempt was made to use both alliteration and end-rime throughout a long poem, the result was a confusion both as to scansion

and interpretation. Gradually in the southern dialect alliteration was dropped and rime adopted. Later the same change took place in the northern and western dialects.

With Chaucer and Spenser the fascination of alliteration was revived, and during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries ran riot, and was extensively used even in serious prose as well as in poetry, so that it became subject to severe criticism and ridicule. Shakspeare in Love's Labor Lost makes Holofernes say

"I will something affect the letter; for  
it argues facility:



The playful princess pierced and  
 pricked a pretty, pleasing, pricklet."  
 Macaulay too expresses his opinion  
 when he speaks of the title of Dr.  
 Johnson's pamphlet - Taxation no  
Tyranny, as "a jingling alliteration  
 which he ought to have despised".  
 But of our nineteenth<sup>century</sup> authors of  
 any standing, none have been  
 severely criticised for its use un-  
 less it be Swinburne.

Modern alliteration is ~~used~~  
 one of the musical devices used  
 merely for ornament, and not to  
 mark the meter, as in Anglo-Sax-  
 on poetry. It is seldom used reg-  
 ularly in many successive lines,  
 and so gives the reader the un-

expected pleasure, in contrast to the pleasing monotony of early alliteration. It can be used just as effectively with one meter as with another. Vowels, to-day, are seldom used as rhyme-letters. Among those who use most pleasingly and most delightfully this modern alliteration with its freedom and its freshness, Tennyson ranks high.

This study of alliteration is based on seven thousand fifty verses of Tennyson including the following poems: The Sea Fairies, The Lotus Eaters, Choric Song, The May Queen, Eleänore, Mariana, Mariana in the South, The Dying

Swan, Lilian, Claribel, The Lady of Shallot, The Miller's Daughter, The Palace of Art, Sir Galahad, The Vision of Sin, The Two Voices, Locksley Hall, Lady Clare, Princess (Part VII and songs), Maud, The Brook, The Coming of Arthur, Geraint and Enid.

Authors differ much in the way in which they use alliteration. With some it is a conscious and apparent effort. The result is sometimes the comical, which is aimed at often by this class of writers; again it is mere stiffness and soon becomes tiresome. But it always suggests the mechanical writer and not the true poet.

Note the apparent effort in the following from John. G. Saxe.

"For John had worked in his early day,  
In Pots and Pearls, the legends say." p. 27.

"Pride, like figs of a certain breed,  
Will manage to live and thrive on 'feed'

As poor as a pauper's pottage." p. 25.  
Again alliteration is used so naturally and so unobtrusively that the reader can scarcely tell even after a critical study just how much of the effect is due to alliteration. The author seems to have been guided merely by a poetical instinct and a musical ear. Such a writer is Tennyson. With ear attuned to the slightest variations of harmony, he selected alliterative let-

ters where they would be most effective, just as he choose the various meters to suit the mood expressed. Doubtless Tennyson himself would have been surprised, had he examined his own works, to have known the amount of alliteration which he used. \*Of the 7012 verses studied 2595 are alliterative, or about 37%. The highest percentage of rime-letters is 71, found in the Lotos Eaters. Next would rank the May Queen with 69%. Locksley Hall with 57%, the Choric Song with 56% and The Sea Fairies with 55% include all in the list above 50%. Maud has just 50%. From this the figures vary down to 19%

\*(See Appendix, Table I)

in the Lady of Shalott.

Some authors, as Keats, have in their youth, an overabundance of music, a luxuriousness and exuberance which would show itself among other ways, in their alliteration. On the other hand, some mechanical authors, not by nature artistic, have a lack of musical devices in their early works, with a steady increase, as they develop by experience, in poetical skill. But with Tennyson's alliteration, neither is the case. For the table shows that both the highest and the lowest percentage in the list, is found in poems of the 1830 publication, while Maud, which was published much later reaches as high as 50%.



But the dramatic effect of Maud has been heightened by the use of so much alliteration. This suggests the thought that the form of the poem and the subject matter may govern the amount. In the pure songs and lyrics, the most melodious forms of verse, one would expect to find the greatest proportion of alliteration. Yet in Lilian, and Claribel, and Eleä-nore we find respectively only 25%, 28% and 25%; while in as philosophical a poem as The Two Voices we find 29%, and in the Palace of Art 45%. These few examples, while not enough either to disprove or establish a law, point toward the conclusion that neither experience nor the form of

the poem govern<sup>the</sup> alliteration, but Tennyson's intuitive sense of fitness.

Tennyson's alliteration includes every consonant in the alphabet, besides some combinations of sounds "s" and the combinations beginning with "s" seem to be his favorites.

Probably, because the sound "s" is suggestive of more differing states of mind than any <sup>other</sup> one letter. When the muscles are outstretched by quick sharp breathing as the result of rapid, irregular motion, <sup>or</sup> in passion or amazement, it is easy to utter such sounds as "st" and "str." For example,

"Waiting to strive a happy strife." p. 74.

"I remember the time, for the roots of  
my hair were stirred  
By a shuffled step." p. 323.

each suggest irregular motion, while the following suggest amazement,—  
 "Why am I sitting here so stunned and  
still?" p. 338.

"Strange that I felt so gay,  
Strange that I tried to-day  
 To beguile her melancholy." p. 336.

One can see the muscles of the arm move as he reads,

"And he struck me, madman, over  
 the face,

Struck me before the languid fool,

Struck for himself an evil stroke." p. 338.

"sh", invariably connected in the mind  
 shrill noises is best illustrated by,—

"And my pulses closed their gates with a  
shock on my heart as I heard

The shrill-edged shriek of a mother  
 divide the shuddering night. p. 323.

\* "l" in most of the poems seems a favorite sound. The slow uncertain vibrations of the tongue in forming the letter, suggest to us the general effect of the sound upon the ear, — calmness and sweetness. The Lotus Eaters, where the whole tone of the poem is dreamy, shows a predominance of "l", not so much in the alliterations, as throughout the words. Note the tone in

"The charmed sunset lingered low adown  
In the red west." p. 42.

"I muse as in a trance, when e'er  
The languors of thy love-deep eyes  
Float on to me." p. 25.

"His bow-string slackened, Languid Love  
Leaning his cheek upon his hand." p. 26.

\*See Appendix Table II.

The whisper letters as "f." and "h" are sometimes used to express fear, deceit or caution.

"Waiting to hear the hounds, but heard instead

a sudden sound of hoofs." p. 137.

"Remembering all her foolish fears about the dress." p. 137.

The sounds "b" and "d" are often suggestive of muscular effort as in  
 "Here rose, an athlete, strong to break or bind

All force in bonds that might endure." p. 35.

"No life that breathes with human breath has ever truly long'd for death." p. 98.

"And the grossness of his nature will have weight to drag thee down." p. 86.

"And a million horrible bellowing echoes broke." p. 338.

Quick, decided movements, and harsh rattling noises are sometimes suggested by "r", as in

"... when the rain is on the roof." p. 88.

"And blindly rushed on all ~~on~~ all the route behind." p. 155.

"The ragged rims of thunder brooding low." p. 34.

Suggestions such as the above depend upon the individual judgement, and on the training and sensitiveness of the ear, so they would differ much for each person. Besides they give reasons for only a few of Tennyson's alliterations, while the bulk of them are still unaccounted for.

Several devices which attract the eye only, sometimes occur, as: -  
The use of words beginning with a



different letter, but the same sound, as -  
 "When have I bowed to her father the  
wrinkled head of the race?" p. 326. III.

"From him who had ceased to share  
 her heart." p. 335. IV.

"Oh king", she cried." p. 132.

or the alliteration between a consonant  
 at the beginning of a word, with one  
 beginning an accented syllable with  
 in the word, as -

"Living alone in an empty house." p. 328. VII.

"And in their double love secure

The little maiden walked demure." p. 98.

or the riming of two sounds both  
 within the word, for example,

"Ussurance only breeds resolve." p. 97.

Tennyson's use of repetition very  
 soon attracts the attention of the

reader. In his earliest poetry it is more abundant, but is still plentiful in his later works. Repetition always serves to heighten the tone of the poem. The light joyousness of The Sea Fairies is increased by such lines as

"Oh hither, come hither, and furl your sails  
Come hither to me, and to me." p. 15.

while the dreariness of Marianna's "moated grange" is intensified by,

"I am aweary, aweary,

I would that I were dead." p. 7.

Repetition of words of course brings with it alliteration, but often the effect is due much more to the sound of the entire word than to the mere alliteration. Many of our set phrases seem to have been formed, or at least re-

tained in constant use because of the pleasingness of rime-letters.

"I cannot will my will, nor work my work." p. 130.

"But day increased from heat to heat." p. 24.

"Oh would she give me vow for vow." p. 27.

It might be objected that the use of such phrases was mere chance and not intended alliteration, but direct repetition is surely used consciously, for the sake of the artistic qualities of the poem.

The repetition, "Maud, Maud, Maud.

Maud" helps to convey to our minds the ecstatic condition of a lover's heart.

Note the intensity of feeling in this, "Falsely, falsely have ye done,

O mother,' she said, 'if this be true.'" p. 111.

A less regular arrangement in the repetition of the word, though not

quite so forcible, yet adds emphasis,  
as,—"Love the gift is Love the debt." p. 28.

"Not let any man think for the public  
good,

But babble, merely for babble." p. 341.

"Scorn'd to be scorn'd by one that I scorn."  
In words from the same root, <sup>p. 332.</sup> there  
is the pleasure of sameness with a  
slight variation. This seems a favorite  
source of alliteration with Tennyson.

"With a joy in which I cannot rejoice." 328.

"That I should die an early death."—27.

"Dreaming, she knew it was a dream."—24.

"In thee all passion becomes passionless."—26.

Tennyson's favorite arrangement for simple alliteration seems to be a parallel to the standard Anglo-Saxon type. Two alliterative

sounds in the first verse are followed by one in the first syllable in the second verse. For example

"And out of town and valley came a noise,  
As of a broad brook o'er a shingly bed  
Brawling..." p. 138.

See what a lovely shell,

Small and pure as a pearl." p. 339.

There is this difference that Tennyson's alliteration is based on the verse as to arrangement, while the Anglo-Saxon is based on the line or half-verse. Often, in the second verse there are preceding syllables corresponding to the Anglo-Saxon "catch."

"Not less the bee would range her cells,  
The fuzzy prickle fire the dells,

The foxglove cluster dappled bells." p. 94.

Just the reverse of the Anglo-Saxon arrangement is also found, but rather sparingly. For example.

"That in a boundless universe

Is boundless better, boundless worse." p. 93.

Again there is what Guest calls "double alliteration". The same sound occurs twice in each of two successive verses. This corresponds to the later, or as Skeat calls it, "degenerated" Anglo-Saxon alliteration.

"When the face of night is fair on  
the dewy downs,

And the shining daffodil dies." p. 342.I.

Often Tennyson adds to the effect, by heaping up the same sound in one verse, as in

"The Mayfly is torn by the swallow, the  
sparrow spear'd by the shrike 326.IV.

"I know it and smile a hard-set smile  
like a stoic." 326.IV.

Often one alliterative sound continues through three or more verses. In many cases it is doubtful if it is true alliteration. The following examples will show the various arrangements of the rime-letters in the verses.

"A life of nothing, nothing worth,  
From that first nothing ere his birth,  
To that last nothing under earth." 97.  
"And ever muttered and maddened, and  
ever wannid with despair,  
And out he walked, when the wind  
like a broken worldling wail'd,  
And the flying gold of the ruin'd  
woodlands drove through the air."

"When the far-off sail is blown by the  
 breeze of a softer clime,  
 Half lost in the liquid azure bloom  
 of a crescent of sea,  
 The silent sapphire-spangled marriage  
 ring of the land." 326.I.

Growing and fading and growing upon  
 me without a sound,  
 Luminous, gemlike, ghostlike, deathlike,  
 half the night long  
Growing and fading and growing, till I  
 could bear it no more,  
 But arose, all by myself, in my own  
 dark garden ground. etc. 326.III.

Although the last quotations have well shown the continuance of one sound through



several verses, they also illustrate interwoven alliteration. This has never been accurately defined. The limits are not fixed and the combinations are endless. Some critics do not recognize it at all, others as Corson, make much of it. In lines like \*328.3. in which the rime-letters are arranged as "m m f f" in the first verse and "f m" in the second, it might be argued that "m" alliterates with "m", "f" with "f", and that the second line contains no alliteration at all. Again, in such combinations as 333.2. where one letter occurs in five successive verses (b b w. l w. w l. l w. b w.) it might be questioned whether there was any alliteration

\* See appendix. Table III.

except "b b" in the first verse, and most certainly "b" in the last verse may be questioned. Yet it certainly adds to the musicalness of the verse, and since it is due to the use of rime-letters it must be considered one species of alliteration. Even in the simplest form of this kind of alliteration, where two alliterative sounds are found in one verse, there are three possible combinations as, —

"Smile and we smile, the lords of  
many lands". 140.

"On a horror of shattered limbs, and a  
wretched swindler's lie  
Clamor and rumble and ringing  
and clatter". 341.1.

Notice that each of these alliterations are in well-balanced phrases. Between smile and smile we have two syllables, and between lords and lands two, and so in the next verse, between s and l in each half of the verse, there is one syllable. This emphasizes the meter and makes the verse more pleasing. But even where the balance is not so marked, the alternating of the same sounds is attractive to the ear.

"Sooth him with thy finer fancies,  
touch him with thy lighter thought."

"Falser than all fancy fathoms, falser  
than all songs have sung." - 86.

The principle of alliteration seems to have governed Tennyson

often in forming his compound words. Note their effect in the following lines.

"Cold and clear-et face, why come  
you so cruelly meeK?" 326.

"Passionless, pale cold face, star-sweet  
on a gloom profound." 326.

"The hollow grot replieth  
Where Claribel low-lieth.-5.

Often in two successive verses two alliterative sounds are found perfectly balanced, as

"Prophet, curse me the blabbing lip  
And curse me the British vermin, the rat."

More often the arrangement is irregular, but yet effective.

Shall I weep if a Hungary fall?  
Shall I shriek if a Poland fail?

"But the churchmen fain would kill  
their church

As the churches have kill'd their Christ."

As the number of alliterative letters in the verse increases, the possibilities of arrangement multiply rapidly. A few cases in which there is a duplicate arrangement in the two lines are found, as —

"I thought the dead had peace, but it  
is not so

To have no peace in the grave, is that  
not said." — 341.

Yet it is very doubtful if that be true alliteration. The following illustrate four rime-letters inter-  
woven <sup>with</sup> in two verses.

"I am sick of the Hall and the hill, I  
 am sick of the moor and the main.  
 Why should I stay? can a sweeter chance  
 ever come to me here?" 325.16.

"Then the far off sail is blown by the  
breeze of a softer clime  
 Half-lost in the liquid azure bloom of a  
crescent of sea." 326.1.

Of course the beauty of these passages  
 is due to many things besides the  
 alliteration, nevertheless it helps much.  
 Often an interweaving continues through  
 three or more verses, and includes as  
 many as five letters. The following  
 examples will be arranged in the  
 order of their complexity.

And the hoofs of the horses beat, beat,  
 And the hoofs of the horses. beat,  
Beat into my scalp and my brain" 34).I.

And given false death her hand, and  
 stolen away,  
 To dreamful wastes, where footless fancies dwell

Among the fragments of the golden day."

334. VII.

Dare I bid her abide by her word?  
 Should I love her so well if she  
 Had given her word to a thing so low?  
 Shall I love her as well if she  
 Can break her word were it even for me?

333. II.

Is it peace or war? Better war! loud  
war by land and by sea,  
War with a thousand battles, and  
shaking a hundred thrones.

325. XII.

Alliteration, of necessity, emphasizes the meter, because to be true alliteration the rime-letters must begin accented syllables. So whatever influence the meter has upon the tone of the poem, alliteration increases it. Thus in Tennyson we find the airiness of Lilian, the dearness of Marianna, and the passion of Maud increased by the alliteration. The liquids add music, the gutturals increase the vividness, the interweavings sug-



gest melodies, which almost seem to sing themselves. Yet all these things are not merely mechanical devices but the outpourings of the deep feelings of the poet's heart; and a cold, critical study, such as this, in contrast with the sympathetic reading of a heart-poem like Maud seems almost sacrilegious.

## Appendix.

Table I.

The basis of calculation in this table is the verse. It is assumed that each verse has but one alliterative letter, and that each alliterative letter is carried through but one verse. Each of these assumptions is false, for often one verse may have two or more ~~same~~-letters as,

"One willow over the river wept.

And shook the wave as the wind did sigh;  
yet the "w" which would count as <sup>p. 17.</sup> one alliteration is found in two successive verses. So the following results, if not mathematically correct, in some measure approximate the truth.

Title.	Date.	No. lines.	No. allit.	Av.
The Sea Fairies	1830.	36.	20.	55%
The Lotos Eaters	1830	45	32	71%
Choric Song.	1830.	128	72	56%
The May Queen.	1830.	156	109	69%
Eleänore	1830.	128	32	25%
Marianna	1830.	72	17	25%
Marianna in the South	1830.	96	32	33%
The Dying Swan.	1830.	42	15	33%
Lilian	1830.	30	8	25%
Charibel	1830.	21	6	28%
The Lady of Shalott	1830.	171	44	19%
The Miller's Daughter	1830.	248	68	25%
The Palace of Art.	1832	296	134	45%
Sir Galahad	1842	84	36	42%
The Vision of Sin	1842.	225	62	27%
The Two Voices	1842.	462	135	29%
Locksley Hall.	1842.	384	184	57%

Title.	Date.	No. lines	No. all lit.	av.
Lady Clare	1842.	88	24	26%
Princess (Part VII and Songs.)	1847	347	122	35%
Maud	1855	1287	647	50%
The Brook		234	77	32%
The Coming of Arthur	1859.	433	158	36%
Geraint and Enid.	1859.	1804	561	30%
Total.		7012	2595	37%

	c	d	f	g	h	j	k	l	m	n	p	q	r	s	t	v	w	y	Inter wov.	Titles.
5	9	8	10	4	9	9	17	6	---	4	---	---	---	25	9	2	4	---	---	Princess (Canto III).
31	43	28	51	25	36	---	2	53	22	4	16	---	19	87	25	2	31	1	42	Geraint and Enid.
38	27	35	33	21	28	1	2	36	47	5	22	1	17	76	10	---	32	3	101	Maud.
5	10	7	17	4	7	1	---	19	11	5	4	---	6	19	7	---	15	1	22	Locksley Hall.
7	5	6	9	5	5	---	---	10	13	1	1	---	10	34	4	1	11	---	6	Palace of Art.
11	8	8	13	8	2	1	---	10	14	4	9	---	1	27	2	---	6	---	6	The Two Voices.
12	13	7	11	5	12	1	4	14	8	1	5	---	7	27	8	---	13	---	9	The Coming of Arthur.
1	6	3	2	2	2	---	---	9	2	---	---	---	2	13	4	1	4	---	9	The Choric Song.
8	9	4	4	3	1	---	---	7	11	2	---	---	---	18	5	---	6	---	16	The May Queen.
9	7	1	8	4	7	---	---	1	7	---	5	---	1	9	6	---	5	---	4	The Brook.
1	2	1	4	---	---	---	---	1	2	---	---	---	---	9	1	1	1	---	3	The Notes Eaters.

Table II.

## Table III.

This table contains the rime-letters of the interwoven alliterations in Mand. A period denotes the end of the verse.

338.g w. g w.

338.1. h b b. r r h h. h.

338.1. s m m f. s m f f.

338.1. f h. f h h.

337.4. w d l l. w d.

338.7. m w s. w m w s. s.

338.8 l b. l b l. l.

337.1. w b w b. b.

336. XXI. t. h h t. t.

336 XXI. f. f m m. m.

336.4. y t l. y t l.

336.1. h h f. f b. b.

336.1. n k. n e n.

337.4. l s l s. l.

336.9. y. y s s y. t t s s.

336.9. l l d. d.

334.8. f d w. d w f f d. f d. f. f.

335.4. s m s. m m. m.

332.3. m m s. s. s s.

332.4. d d w. s w s. d d.

334.7. d. d. d l m l m d.

334.6. l l w. l w w l. l.

334.3. s l. l s l. s l. l.

334.2. h. h c. g h c g.

331.1. h l h l. n l h n.

341.2. t p t. r p. r.

343.2. c. c w w c c.

341.1. p n s. p n s.

341.1. d d. d. h h d. h.

341.1. h h b b. h h b. b b.

339.1. r s. s w w r w. s.

339.2. c c n. n c.

340.1. t t p. l p. t l.

343.4. p d p d. d.

326.1. l s l b s b.

326.3 p. p p s s p.

325.16. w w f p p f.

325.16 s h h s m m. s s s.

325.14. s l. s l.

325.12. w b w l w l s. w t h b s t h.

325.15. s s. s. s r s. r r.

323.3. s s w w. s. s s s. s.

343.2. d y y d d. d.

342.1. l. l s l s. s s. s.

342.6. c b. c b.

341.2. c k c. c k c.

332.2. b b w. l w. w l. l w. b w.

332.4. d c d. c. c. d c.

329.4. w p. w p.

329.9. s, t s t. s t s. s s. s.



328.3. llhd. hd.

327.1. s. slml. mlm. sm.

328.3. mmff. fm.

327.8 sf. ssf.

327.9. llhl. lh. lh. h.

326.2. lgh. h. hgl.

326.1. sbbs. bs.

The alliterations in Maud are so striking and so skillfully interwoven, that they serve for illustration, better perhaps than others, and so have been more frequently quoted in the paper.

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